Report on the 2008 BC Summit

CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

THE 2008 BC SUMMIT

REPRESENTATIVE FOR
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Representative for Children and Youth Awards of Excellence recognize recipients for their commitment to and focus on improving the lives of vulnerable children. This year, four British Columbians and two B.C. organizations received recognition for their excellence and exceptional efforts benefiting children and youth around the province.

The award recipients for 2008 are:

- Advocacy Award of Excellence: Mr. Fred Ford, Victoria
- Cultural Heritage and Diversity Award of Excellence: Mr. Peter Thomas McKay, New Aiyansh
- Innovative Services Award of Excellence: Fir Square Combined Care Program at BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre, Vancouver
- Service Provider Award of Excellence: The After Hours Program (Team Members) Ministry of Children and Family Development, Fraser Region
- Youth Leadership Award of Excellence: Ms. Bacilia "Cia" Ramirez, Vancouver
- Life-time Achievement Award of Excellence: Dr. Lois Jean Hlady, Vancouver

Champions for Children and Youth
The 2008 BC Summit

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond
B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth

Adults often think of childhood as a carefree, happy time. And while that may be true for many of our children, too many others are growing up without the sense of safety and belonging that is fundamental to healthy development. More than 14,000 B.C. children live outside their parents' homes, and we know from research as well as experience that these young people face significant challenges. All children must thrive and have meaningful supports for optimal health, safety and well-being. These are hallmarks of a good system.

Recognizing the need to work together to address these challenges, the Champions for Children and Youth BC Summit brought together experts from around the world, along with professionals who work with children, the private sector and others, to explore key issues and emerging opportunities to serve young people more effectively. A number of youth - including Summit co-chairs Lindsey Richardson and Justine "Fraggle" Goulet – took part in the proceedings, while others spoke via video interviews.

The focus of the Summit was "What can adults do?" So it made sense to have mostly adults in attendance. At the same time, we think it is important for children and youth to know what was discussed and – more importantly – where we go from here.

This report is dedicated to children and youth, and we hope it will be shared with them. The youth who participated in the Summit touched me profoundly with their honesty, trust and reminder that we need to do much better. It looks at the Summit's main themes and captures highlights of what we learned. It concludes with an outline of our plan going forward – including information about opportunities for children and youth to have their voices heard.

For more detailed information on the Summit, including video clips of presentations, or to learn more about the Representative for Children and Youth, go to www.rcybc.ca.

LGen Roméo Dallaire (Ret.), Keynote Speaker

Stephen Lewis, Keynote Speaker

"Their stories made me cry and make me want to do more when I work with my youth."

"I have a new appreciation for the word 'disconnect' and how much damage can be done when people are not connected...."

"I feel inspired to do better with my kids."

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, Union of BC Indian Chiefs

Nigel Fisher, President and CEO, UNICEF Canada

Nico Trocmé, McGill University

Sandra Edgmon, Cherokee Nation Indian Child Welfare

What We Heard - Key Themes

Connection and Belonging

One of the most-discussed issues at the Summit was the basic need of all human beings for a sense of connection and belonging. For children to have the best supports for their development, strong attachment to stable and engaged adults, especially parents, is vital. A number of people who had grown up in care talked about the way being out of the parental home affected them and how, even many years later, it continues to shape their lives.

Angie Cross, who is now in her 30s, compared coming into care to "a family amputation." Like most young people in that situation, she experienced a great deal of grief and loss. Although she had support in care, she said, "as an adult I started wondering, 'Why am I not good at relationships? Why can I not connect with people?' Then I realized all my childhood relationships were with professionals."

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip of the Penticton Indian Band also described intense feelings of isolation and disconnection – not just from his family but also from his community, his culture and his own identity. He was placed in a non-Aboriginal home as an infant and, as he grew up, his adoptive parents taught him "Indians were bad people, dangerous, not to be trusted." Stewart said, "I know in my heart they thought they were doing the right thing. They just didn't understand how damaging it could be. I grew up not knowing who I was."

These and other personal stories touched participants deeply. It made us all think about the 14,000 children and youth out of the parental home today. Is it better for them? Meantime, other presenters looked at the issue of connection and belonging from a scientific standpoint. For example:

- Infant mental health expert Evelyn Wotherspoon presented evidence that, for children in the early years, "the quality of relationships is the most critical factor in development."
- Dr. Howard Dubowitz, who specializes in neglect-related issues, said research has shown the corpus callosum – a critical part of the brain – is actually reduced in size in children who are neglected.
- Dr. Ron Abrahams, an expert in addiction, described how, in lab experiments, rats who were with their families would try morphine once and then walk away from it, while rats who were alone and disconnected from their families would keep going back for more, again and again.

"I always became so attached to my caregivers, hoping they would adopt me. Even after 30 placements, that was my one wish."

– *Ayla (Youth in Care panel)*

"Connectedness is the key to healthy development."

– *Cindy Kiro, New Zealand's Child Commissioner*

"I knew things were bad when I was seven, but I had no idea how bad until I was an adult. I want kids to know they can come out of it."

– *Ayla (Youth in Care panel)*

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Fraggle Goulet, Youth Co-Chair

Lindsey Richardson, Youth Co-Chair

Chief Shawn Atleo, BC Assembly of First Nations

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with the Youth Panel

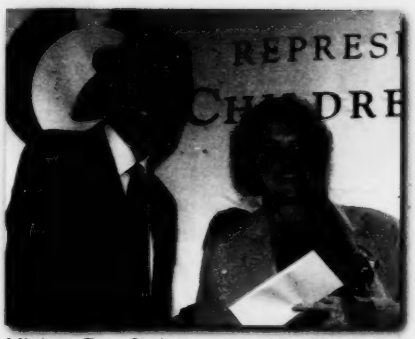
Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with Grand Chief Ed John, Tl'azt'en Nation

"It was an honour to be part of such an important Summit. I appreciate having the opportunity to talk about our kids and the hope that is in our shared work."

"I thought the Summit was impressive. I've been telling folks here about the Representative's office, wishing we had something similar."

"A quick thank you for a great Summit - hopefully it will quick start positive change in this province."

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with Cia Ramirez, winner of the Representative's Award of Excellence in Youth Leadership



Minister Tom Christenson and Dr. Elizabeth Whynot of the Fir Square Combined Care Program

Elder Barbara Charlie gives a Blessing

There was much discussion about the need to keep young people connected to their families and communities of origin. Christine, who grew up in care, said her foster family "was awesome, but I didn't get enough family time." She added that it can be very tough for parents to stay connected to children in care, especially if they're not in the same community.

Colby, who also grew up in care, provided what was possibly the best summing up of what kids in care – and all kids – need: "Someone they can trust, someone to be there for them, someone to love them for who they are."

Opportunity and Resilience

"Children," Romeo Dallaire told the Summit, "have an incredible capacity to rebound if given the opportunity." He ought to know. As commander of the United Nations' forces in Rwanda, he saw children live through absolute horror and still retain their curiosity, their interest in learning, and their interest in life.

Closer to home, Dr. Ron Abrahams talked about his experience with moms and babies in Vancouver. His research shows that, even when moms face significant challenges, their babies benefit from being close to them, and that early bonding is tied to resilience and improving the health of mothers as well.

Resilience is basically the ability to deal with adversity. "For children, being resilient means they have not been overwhelmed by too many risks," said mental health specialist Evelyn Wotherspoon. Systems and individuals build resilience.

But even children who are overwhelmed by risk at an early age "can come out of it," said Ayla, who is now 21. She entered care at the age of seven and was moved more than 30 times. In spite of all she experienced, she now has a stable loving family of her own. It has not been an easy journey for her and she worries about her sister still in the system.

Angie Cross, who calls herself an alumnus of the Canadian care system, has also gone on to have a family of her own and "a love like no other." She pointed to two pivotal events that supported her own resilience.

One was having a social worker who "loved the heck out of me" and became a true "life mentor." The other was discovering the Youth in Care Network, "a group of kids in and from care. Without them," she said, "I wouldn't have had the feeling of being valued." Angie connected with the network at age 16. "Some people say that's late," she explained, "but many children in care never find that sense of belonging."

"Getting connected with people who 'got' me was a pivotal moment in my life. Without [the Youth in Care Network], I wouldn't have had the feeling of being valued."

– Angie Cross

"You can't deliver services to children and families the way you deliver a pizza."

– Eileen Munro, London School of Economics

"I am a person, not a case."

– Christine Devries, alumna of the BC foster care system

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond and Lieutenant Governor Steven Point

Elder Mary Charles gives a blessing

Virginia Greene, Business Council of British Columbia

Minister Tom Christenson and Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond

Maria Kaisa Aula, Finland's Ombudsman for Children

Charlotte Wadell, Simon Fraser University

Cindy Kiro, Children's Commissioner, New Zealand

Harriet Ward, Centre for Child and Family Research, England

Paul Gillespie, Kids' Internet Safety Alliance, Ontario

The Hon. Ted Hughes and Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with MCFD's After Hours Team, winner of the Representative's Award of Excellence in Service Provision

On a professional level, several people spoke about the crucial role of education in supporting resilience. For example, Finland's Ombudsman for Children, Maria Kaisa Aula, said her nation's education system is a great source of pride because it "levels possibilities for children from different backgrounds." Finnish students outperform kids from other countries in standardized testing, she said, "not because of the gifted students, but because of the support we offer those with special needs."

The importance of culture was discussed at length, especially for Aboriginal children and youth who are much more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be in government care. Sandra Edgmon of the Cherokee Nation said, "Although we are from all parts of the world, we all have the same issues in protecting Aboriginal children." In the mid 20th century, Cherokee children were sent to boarding schools, not unlike the residential schools that operated in B.C. Today, Edgmon said, many of their people have "major attachment disorder" as a result of that experience.

The Cherokee Nation also has a well-established service system, providing health care, education and child welfare services since the 1980s. Those services are valuable, she said but, "more important, we can give our children culture, heritage, language and identity."

New Zealand's Children's Commissioner, Cindy Kiro, talked about her experience with Maori families. They, too, have experienced discrimination and disconnection. "Cultural identity and connectedness to kin are additional coping mechanisms" for children in crisis, Kiro said.

Grand Chief Edward John of B.C.'s Tl'azt'en Nation agreed. In providing more opportunities for children and youth, he said, "we have to build from our families up."

The Summit also heard from Jim White of Covenant House International, whose residential program helps street kids. "Kids who are successful," he said, "are kids who have a vision for themselves. As caregivers, we have to take on the role of helping kids identify that vision" and supporting them to achieve it.

"The decision to apprehend a child reverberates through many generations."

- Grand Chief Stewart Phillip

"I would like to see the word 'placement' abolished. We are talking about where children live."

- Eileen Munro, London School of Economics

"Why is it so terribly difficult [for governments] to give children and youth the priority they deserve?"

- Stephen Lewis, Keynote Speaker

Education Panel

Lieutenant Governor Steven Point and Peter Thomas McKay

Aron Shlonsky, University of Toronto

Dr. Richard Meen, University of Toronto

Delegates with Nigel Fisher, Keynote Speaker

Dr. Evan Adams, Aboriginal Peoples' Health, UBC

"The speakers were visionary and enlightening and the delegates who work so hard for children and youth are worthy of support."

"I thought the selection of speakers and the material presented was really exceptional."

"Good things are clearly happening for vulnerable kids in BC."

Rapture Risin

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with Dr. Jean Hlady, BC Children's Hospital and winner of the Representative's Award of Excellence for Lifetime Achievement

Michael Hayes, Simon Fraser University

Rights and Resources

These two themes – rights and resources – arose at the Summit again and again. Among the rights most often cited was children's right to be heard, consulted and involved in decisions affecting them.

"The number one requirement for advancing children's rights is for the voices of children and youth to be heard," said Nigel Fisher, president and CEO of UNICEF Canada. He also talked about government spending in areas such as war, and called for the development of a national children's budget to help ensure programs for children and youth receive appropriate funding. "Children tend to be invisible in public accounts," he said. "They are the most vulnerable – and the least influential – when it comes to budgeting."

Mental health specialist Evelyn Wotherspoon expressed a similar sense of frustration. She described how babies' health can be seriously compromised if their mothers aren't able to bond with them. "We know what to do for these moms," she said. "But we need resources." A number of people also said that fewer supports are available to families, compared to foster families.

Stephen Lewis, who heads an international AIDS advocacy organization, said "The U.S. and Canada now spend $3 billion a week on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" while those who work on behalf of children have to scramble and compete for resources. "There's something wrong with our sense of priorities," he said, "and children pay the price."

Harriet Ward, who works in the UK, talked about the need to track resources and find out whether they are, indeed, making a difference in supporting children's rights and needs. "We spent vast amounts of money," she said, "but we don't know where it goes...or where it could be better deployed."

Dr. Howard Dubowitz, an expert on neglect issues, said it might be helpful to think of children's rights in two ways: Rights with a capital R and rights with a lower-case R. The former, he said, "are about the big picture, the policy arena, the legal system." By contrast, rights with a lower-case R "are the opportunities we have every day to do what is right for children."

Teresa Lum, who grew up in care and now works as a child and youth advocate, reminded participants that everyone shares responsibility for ensuring children's rights are upheld. "You all have a role in our lives," she said, "because the government – funded collectively by our tax dollars – was our parent." Colby, who also grew up in care said, "Foster kids are just like you. You have the choice to say, 'Yes, they're worth it.'"

"Plans and commissions may seem abstract... but they demonstrate the political will and capacity to muster resources for children."

– Nigel Fisher, President and CEO, UNICEF Canada

"Much of what means the most to children doesn't cost anything at all."

– Helen Jones, UK children's policy advisor

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with the Fir Square Combined Care Program, winners of the Representative's Award of Excellence in Innovative Service

"It was such an honour to be part of the excellent Summit, please convey our special thanks to Mary Ellen."

"Wanted to congratulate you and your team on an excellent, inspiring, and in some ways distressing (not a negative comment, but a realization that there is so much good work that needs to be done) Summit. Great work!"

"I really enjoyed the conference and was so impressed with the care and thoughtfulness of everyone involved in the planning and organizing. I attend many conferences and this is one of the top experiences."

The Hon. Ted Hughes with Peter Manning of MCFD's After Hours Team

Helen Jones, Department for Children, Schools and Families, England

Jim White, Covenant House International

"I was expecting 'bitching about their experiences' but realized my power as a social worker has long-term consequences and I need to be mindful of that."

"I gained so much information from the people I met during the Summit as well as the other presenters. I made some wonderful contacts."

"Just wanted to say that we felt the conference was impeccably organized and very worthwhile for our organization. Please keep us up to date on next year's event as it evolves."

Serving Children and Youth More Effectively

Throughout the presentations and discussions at the Summit, one question was ever-present: How can we do a better job of serving children and youth? The answers spanned a wide range – from better care for pregnant women to better supports for youth in care when they make the transition to adult life.

Nico Trocmé, a social work professor at McGill University, said we need to take neglect more seriously. For children under three, he said, "it poses an immediate risk" and should be treated the same as cases of suspected sexual or physical abuse. Dr. Ron Abrahams, who specializes in addiction issues, called for more safe, supportive housing for women at risk and their babies.

Aron Shlonsky, who works at the University of Toronto, said data – the same type used by insurance companies – could help social workers make more informed judgments about whether children can stay safely with their parents. And New Zealand Children's Commissioner Cindy Kiro said we need to do more to ensure child welfare systems "recognize children's need for place and the need for love, warmth and consistency" along with other necessities such as food, clothing and housing.

Many people spoke about the need to involve, engage and listen to children. Several pointed out that, in social work, it is common practice to engage with the parents, rather than with children directly. Others spoke of the need to collaborate, for people to work more closely together, and for adults to care about everyone's children the way they care about their own.

For example, Paul Gillespie, president of the Kids' Internet Safety Alliance, talked about his efforts to get police worldwide engaged in stopping the abuse and exploitation of children, no matter where they live. "Not knowing who they are doesn't make them any less important than our own kids," he said. Helen Jones, a children's policy advisor in the UK, had similar advice for those who work with children and youth. "We need to think, all the time, 'What if this was my child?'"

Chief Shawn Atleo, BC Assembly of First Nations

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond with panelists from the Broadway Youth Centre

Evelyn Wotherspoon, Infant Mental Health and Family Law Initiative

Dr. Perry Kendall, Provincial Health Officer

LGen Roméo Dallaire (Ret.), Keynote Speaker, and Chuck Chandler, Queen Alexandra Foundation

Dr. Ron Abrahams, University of British Columbia

"I wanted to write and personally thank you for your dedication and efforts towards bringing our nations together and working at a collaborative approach towards making a brighter and stronger future for the children and youth of today. I was very much honoured to take part in the Summit."

"We were so impressed by the caliber and passion of all the speakers. We also enjoyed the format of the Summit so that most delegates were able to gain the insight and information from the majority of speakers as there was the minimum of breaking into smaller groups."

What We Can Do – Next Steps

A Message from the Representative

Without a doubt, the most compelling message emerging from our 2008 Champions for Children and Youth Summit is the need for a concerted effort toward achieving a stronger child-serving system. To achieve success, it's essential to have the support and engagement of legislators, service providers, researchers, families and – most importantly – children and youth. As the Representative for Children and Youth, I believe this support and engagement would be a long-term plan for the children and youth of British Columbia.

At the Summit we heard from local, national and international experts with inspiring ideas about how we could move forward to improve the well-being of children in our province. Despite differences in expertise, country of origin, or background, a common thread weaving through the presentations was the need to coordinate services in a way that makes the best use of knowledge in a child-centred and consistent manner.

In all complex undertakings, it can be challenging to get all parts moving together smoothly. To address this effectively, service delivery change must proceed in an orderly and logical fashion, and be sustainable over the long term.

Drawing on the experiences of other jurisdictions and on the strengths of our own system, we can develop a plan for B.C.'s children and youth that will result not only in steady improvements in well-being for all children, but in significant improvements to the lives of the most vulnerable children in our society.

What then are the elements of such a plan? What have we heard from our experts about the ingredients and the critical success factors?

Start With a Passion

The defining characteristic of our Summit speakers was the passion those women and men brought to the podium – a passion which shines through their lives into commitment and action. A plan to improve the well-being of B.C.'s children and youth has to have that same high level of passion. A plan for children must be easily understood by the public, decision-makers, service providers and, most importantly, young people and families.

As well, if we say we are going to do something, we must follow through. We must also be wise enough to realize that passion and vision are only starting points, and not the finish line.

But the passion and vision of only those involved in the child-serving system is not sufficient on its own. We must ignite the flickers of interest we see in decision-makers. We must intrigue the public, earn their interest, and spark their support. We can do this through clarity of purpose, certainty in decision-making and willingness to follow through. Collaboration is the guiding beacon that will lead progress on a plan for B.C.'s children.

We have a wealth of people who are walking vessels of that passion – the front-line social workers, foster parents, service providers and caregivers, many of whom sat shoulder to shoulder with us at this year's Summit. These women and men have such a positive impact on young lives every day throughout our province, assisting children, youth and their families with a huge range of challenges. They are driven by passion.

And they, like us, can join in sharing the passion to take what is now a plan growing in people's minds, to a reality of a better tomorrow for B.C.'s kids. As Nigel Fisher urged us at our Summit ... "Lead from where you are."

The Power of Working Together

I ask everyone to consider this – the enthusiasm we all felt at the Summit, the good ideas that were being discussed in every corner, the pure energy that swirled out of meeting rooms after an exciting panel présentation – could these nourish the development of a longer-term plan for children?

Building on the Summit energy, working in a collaborative fashion with this government, the business community, child-serving agencies and others – what we could achieve is inspiring to consider.

The work and passion of improving the lives of children is not an area marked by many strong or fundamental differences, in terms of goals and objectives. There is often very spirited discussion but a great deal of like-mindedness among practitioners, researchers and those in positions like yours and mine.

It would be unwise to minimize partisan disagreements around these areas, but it's more that the disagreements in the field are about the means to achieve the goals and objectives that are widely shared, and less about the goals and objectives themselves.

Let me say this in another way – are we not all in favour of a strong and effective child-serving system that secures the safety of vulnerable children, and sees to their well-being and successful development?

Our challenge is to extend this consensus into helping to create a present and a future for British Columbia's children and youth that lives up to their promise, and the promise of where we live. This is a province that is one of the most beautiful in Canada, among the healthiest and wealthiest places the world. And yet, our children face so many challenges, so many barriers.

"To lead from where we are" takes on another meaning in this context also. In order to set out a plan for children – in particular, vulnerable children – that will be effective in meaningful, day-to-day differences for children, we need to start by looking very specifically at what are called, in government circles, performance measures. Simply put, this means: how are we doing with respect to those children?

A plan to make a real change in kids' lives can't be a plan of 30 objectives for children and youth. It is going to have to be a plan of a relatively small number of key objectives.

Things like ... ***Children are safe. Children are healthy. Children are educated. Vulnerable children are supported.*** It has to be a manageable number of distinct and understandable key objectives. It has to be real.

Our amazing shared experience at the 2008 Champions for Children and Youth Summit reinforced, for so many of us, that change is required, as we seek to support families and their loved ones. We don't have time to waste in making that change a reality, as childhood is so fleeting for our children. If the commitment is sparked, particularly by those of us who joined together at the Summit, and then ripples out to your colleagues, and further from there – it can easily be done.

I will be an increasingly persistent voice calling for the need for this plan for children and youth as we head into a new year, and I would be most honoured if you, the 2008 Summit delegates, would join me in urging others to support it.

Be a Champion – What can you do?

Each of our speakers in their own way exhorted us to do better in our work with children, youth and families today and tomorrow. The development of a plan for children may seem like a job for someone else or for the government. The reality is that there is a role for every individual, every organization, in this work. There are numerous ways to contribute. Lead from where you are.

For individuals

- Nourish your amazing abilities to heal and teach and support our children and youth, and know that you are making positive differences every day.
- Take back to your workplace the learning from the Summit and use it to help guide your work.
- Develop a clear understanding about your own work and develop a data set that explains it, to eventually contribute to a plan for children for British Columbia.
- Understand how the other human service agencies in your area work and make a connection with at least one of them that you were previously unfamiliar with.

For agencies

- Stay focused on hearing the soft voices of children and youth, and search out more ways to hear from them.
- Begin to produce data about your service and promote data collection about your services with your staff and community supporters for input into a plan for children.
- Forge an alliance for service with another agency that is not usually part of your network.
- Consider an exchange of services/in-kind contributions with another agency or organization.

I conclude by thanking you all, with heartfelt appreciation, for sharing your time, your wisdom, and your passion by participating in our 2008 Champions for Children and Youth Summit. The contributions of each and every delegate cannot be overstated. I personally will carry the energizing memories of the Summit forward in all that I do, as I hope you will.

I leave you with a quote I shared during the Summit, from Lilian G. Katz, an international leader in early childhood education.

She said:

> *"I really believe that each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must recognize that the welfare of our children is intimately linked to the welfare of all other people's children.*
>
> *After all, when one of our children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it.*
>
> *If one of our children is harmed by violence, someone else's child will be responsible for the violent act.*
>
> *The good life for our own children can be secured only if a good life is also secured for all other people's children.*
>
> *But to worry about all other people's children is not just a practical or strategic matter; it is a moral and ethical one; to strive for the well-being of all other people's children is also right."*

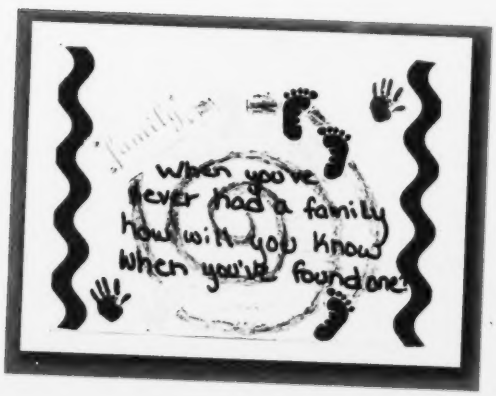
Thank you, for joining us at the 2008 Summit, and for creating a better path, not only for our own children but for all other people's children.

"Children and youth look to families, to communities and to us for nourishment – physical, emotional, cultural and intellectual. They look to us for shelter from the harshness of the world that too often defines their lives. When our children and youth turn to us for this help, we must stand up for them with our voices, our strength, our courage and our actions."

- Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth

"The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers."

– UN Convention on the Rights of the Child



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